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ABSTRACT

English grammar testing practices from the middle school level to the first two years of the bachelor's degree in India are examined, and suggestions for change are presented. Ten to thirty percent of the total marks allotted to question papers in English are set aside for the testing of grammar and usage. It is argued that syllabuses at present do not possess the complexity and specificity necessary to direct and assess the pupil's growth in the control of grammar through the years. The suggested framework within which grammatical subject matter can be organized in syllabus statements gives coherence to the objectives of grammar learning instead of making grammar appear as a list of unrelated topics. The levels of behavior particularly applicable to grammar learning are knowledge, application, and communication. A framework for evolving instructional objectives can be developed by considering grammatical items at the three different levels of performance proposed. This method will enable the tester to see more clearly which objectives merit inclusion in the test and the weighting for each item. Applications to diagnostic tests and remedial tests are noted, and examples of question types for examination at the university level are presented. (SW)

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What are we Testing?—Grammar

L. V. Alamelu

OUR concern in this third article is with grammar, and the question 'What are we testing?' is focussed on the grammar section of question papers in English from Middle School to the first two years of the Bachelor's Degree. Ten to thirty per cent of the total marks allotted to question papers in English are set aside for the testing of grammar and usage. It is pertinent to ask what we are testing when almost every examination scheme in English includes such a grammar component. The raising of this question becomes urgent when we note the fact that the grammar section of any question paper in English can be replaced by the grammar section of any other, regardless of the class level. Not much progress would appear to have been made from Class VIII or IX to II year B.A., judging from the questions on grammar.

Why is this so? This article argues that syllabuses at present do not possess the complexity and specificity necessary to direct

and assess the pupil's growth in the control of grammar through the years.

One might think the grammar content in syllabuses is the most completely stated of all content areas. The most comprehensive syllabus in grammar that we have is that compiled by the NCERT for the school level from the introductory year to the final year of English at school. The syllabus lists topics in grammar in some order of complexity and learning (teaching?) difficulty from class to class. But even this syllabus lacks a comprehensive linguistic framework from which the subject matter can be derived. It is at best a list of topics without explicit recognition of the relation of the various elements of the grammar system to other elements in the language system. A framework within which grammatical subject matter can be organised in syllabus statements is suggested below:

Elements: Their form, rules of co-occurrence or combination and signification.

- A. The elements of grammar consisting of the various types of structural words which belong to the noun phrase such as articles and pronouns; those that operate in the verb phrase such as auxiliaries and modals; those that have a linking function such as prepositions and conjunctions;
- B. Structural signals of the noun phrase i.e., gender, number and person, and of the verb phrase such as tense, aspect and phase;
- C. Rules for the phrase structure of different types of sentences such as declarative, interrogative, imperative;
- D. Rules for transformation—negation, passivisation, indirect narration, complementation and other types of subordination;

- E. Rules of subcategorization and selectional restrictions i.e., the grammar of words.
- F. The meanings that can be signalled by these elements and by the structures into which they enter. For example, the modal 'might' signifies possibility in 'He might meet you at the station'. With the perfect infinitive, it can mean irritation at the non-performance in the past of an action that was possible.

The details in the content area can be filled out and organised by reference to a comprehensive (even if not complete) description of the language. *A Reference Grammar of Contemporary English* compiled by Quirk, Greenbaum *et al.*, (1972) and *A Communicative Grammar of English* by Leech and Svartvik (1975) are two useful sources in English.

The advantage of such a framework is that it gives coherence to the objectives of grammar learning instead of making grammar appear as a list of unrelated topics: articles, prepositions, pronouns, negation, transformation.

The provision of such a frame of reference enables us to focus on the role of each element relative to other elements in the language system. It might be possible to select topics that form the core of English grammar for communication in a second language using this frame. However, re-organisation of the topic list alone cannot provide the complexity necessary for monitoring students' control of grammar. Question papers following from this scheme are at best likely to be increasingly complex from class to class in the grammatical items they cover. But we expect students to grow not only in their ability to learn more and more complex topic content but also in the

ability to perform more and more complex tasks.

For example, what is it that students need to be able to do with prepositions at the Intermediate level that they cannot at Class VIII? We know that complex prepositions are to be learnt at a later stage and single-word prepositions at an earlier. Prepositions as particles in phrasal verbs occur later in the syllabus than simple prepositions of time, place and direction. This is important information. But we are not told which of the following the students should be able to do in Class VIII and which in Class X:

- i) recognise and call a preposition by the right name when they see one;
- ii) show understanding of its meaning, by answering questions on parts of passages where it is crucial to the meaning;
- iii) supply the right preposition when a pictorial or gesticulatory stimulus is given.
- iv) use it without being prompted to 'use prepositions' at appropriate places in a given passage;
- v) use it independently in sentences of their own when a context of situation is provided;

Different levels of control are possible and appropriate for students at different stages of learning. Targets for achievement must be articulated in terms of level of control for each stage.

To make possible such specific articulation of behaviour we are again in need of a frame of reference. A table of specifications to provide such a framework can be conveniently abstracted from the levels and

categories of cognitive behaviour set out in Bloom (1956), Blooin, Hastings and Madous (1971) and Disick and Valette (1972).

The levels of behaviour particularly applicable to grammar learning are knowledge, application and communication. Knowledge is the level at which one knows what an element is and what it does, and is acquainted with the rules of combination into which it enters with other elements. It includes knowledge of the various elements of grammar, of the rules of sentence structure and transformation, of the various meanings indicated by the elements and the structures. This knowledge may be tested through conventional completion and transformation tasks. At the level of application which Valette and Disick prefer to call transfer, the student should be able to put his knowledge to appropriate use without prompting.

The distinction between knowledge and application levels of activity is illustrated by the sample questions below :

1. The people gave him a glorious reception.
(Rewrite in the passive voice).
2. *a.* You surprised me by speaking that way.
b. I was
[Complete *b* preserving the meaning at *a.*]

In the first question, ability to manipulate a given structure is demanded ; in the second, the ability to decide on and carry out the structural changes that are necessary to convey a particular meaning. Application level tasks may require the use of more than one rule at a time. They are half-way in the progression from knowledge to appropriate use in life-like situations. Grammar tasks at the communication level merge into text or discourse, written and spoken, if we envisage that students are being prepared

for a series of typical sociolinguistic situations. A sample communication task may be shown as follows :

Given below is one half of a conversation between a visitor and a student. Suppose you are the student who gave these answers. What were the questions that were asked ? Write each question fully.

Visitor : Will you show me the Principal's Office, please ?

Student : Yes, please come with me.

(1)

Visitor :

Student : I am in the first year Intermediate class.

(2)

Visitor :

Student : There are 150 students in my batch.

(3)

Visitor :

Student : Yes, we are divided into sections for tutorials.

(4)

Visitor :

Student : We have one tutorial class a week in English.

(5)

Visitor :

Student : We get a written assignment once a week.

A framework for evolving instructional objectives can be arrived at by considering each item in the topic list at the three different levels of performance proposed. The advantage of such complexity to the testers is that instead of juggling with topics in grammar, he can now consider priorities among behavioural objectives. This scheme

will enable the tester to see more clearly which objectives merit inclusion in the test and what weightage should be allotted to each in terms of the number of tasks. Sampling will differ according to the purpose of the test. This scheme also makes it possible to vary the testing material to suit the intention of the test. For a proficiency test, a comprehensive description of English such as the *Reference Grammar* by Quirk *et al* would be useful source material.

It is neither necessary nor possible to include every little rule in a language test but it is crucial that the test be as comprehensive as possible within physical limitations. A topic list derived from a comprehensive description of English arranged within the framework suggested would help make it so. Selecting the type of task suitable for proficiency testing becomes systematic when done within the framework of a scheme such as this. It is comparatively easy to arrive at the decision to use mainly application-level items in proficiency testing (because communication-level activities cannot be adequately sampled and because knowledge-level tasks are not always reliable indicators of language-using ability) by consulting the content-behaviour table.

The source material for remedial tests i.e., achievement tests used in a remedial course, would come from the findings of analysis of errors in the language work of learners. This analysis may take the contrastive approach if the students belong to a particular language or language family group. Or it might make use of the developmental approach to errors. These approaches and the problem areas they identify will make the scope of tests in remedial courses more limited or specialised and more detailed than that of a proficiency test where the question asked is whether the ability defined is displayed fully or not.

Diagnostic tests may share the comprehensive concern of proficiency tests, but the distinction of levels of skill is vital here. Diagnostic testing so far has had its basis in the knowledge level. It is quite conceivable that the shortcomings in student ability lie at other levels. Tasks at different levels on the same topics would show up the precise level at which the student falters with regard to that topic. A student may be able to understand the meaning of certain structures but be quite unable to use them spontaneously in expressing the meaning. 'Remedial' tests may also profit from such differentiation of levels of achievement.

This discussion would be most usefully concluded by a consideration of the means or methods of testing skill in the use of grammar. To begin with, let us look at the level of grammar control assessed in the various tests of grammar typically incorporated in our achievement tests. Here are examination questions reproduced from two university question papers to illustrate the question types that are being used:

1. Change the number in the following:
There is no leaf left on the tree.
2. Change the voice in the following:
The cat has stolen the cheese.
3. Use the past tense:
The boy is strong. He can lift the heavy weight.
4. Use the proper relative pronoun:
There's the boy.....book was lost yesterday.
5. Make the following negative:
There is something left here.
6. Use the infinitive:
I hope I shall pass the examination successfully.

7. Insert correct prepositions :
The house was.....fire and the
fire brigade was sent.....
8. Supply the missing words :
She is.....honest student.
9. Use the negative :
You must answer all the questions.
10. Disagree with the remark :
She didn't talk to him.
11. Use a question tag :
She sang beautifully.
12. Add 'a', 'an' or 'the' where necessary :
They are studying.....literature
and in particular.....literature
of.....United States of America.
13. Combine the sentences :
It is very hot today. They cannot
play tennis today.
14. Change into a question :
She left the book somewhere.
15. Arrange in their correct places the
"adverbs and adverbial expressions in
brackets :
He will be glad to meet you (always,
very, any day you like, after the
office hours).
16. Give the correct form of the verbs in
brackets :
Last year I (go) to the U.S. As I
(never be) abroad I (be) very excited.
17. Use in sentences of your own the
following as a verb and as a noun :
mind, paint
18. Rewrite, using 'since the war' instead
of the word indicated :
We are living in the country *now*.
19. Correct the following sentences :
(a) There is no leaves on the trees.
(b) I feel so boring that I want to
go out.

The table below categorises each of the items under the three levels of performance we have proposed.

<i>Level</i>	<i>Item Nos.</i>
Knowledge	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 18, 19
Application	8, 10, 16, 17
Communication	—

The fifteen questions falling under knowledge do not call for knowledge of the meaning of the grammatical items involved. What is required is to operate the rules *as directed*. Expressing meaning is not the main concern. Questions of application are too few in number. Of these No. 17 is again biased strongly towards knowledge. Besides, a student could produce sentences like 'Never mind' and 'He has a great mind' from which it is not clear whether the student really knows how to use these words appropriately, though the categories are correctly applied. Many of the items falling under 'knowledge' can be converted into 'application' items. For example, the problem in item No. 2 can be posed differently:

Complete the sentence at *b* without changing the meaning at *a* :

a. The cat has stolen the cheese.

b. The cheese.....

Attention is taken away from the 'voice' problem familiar to the traditional grammar class to the problem of saying the same thing in other words. This may not be a very high aim but it certainly keeps the student close to the meaning of structures he is working with.

To take another example, item No. 7 is a good knowledge-level item, good for use soon after prepositions have been taught (also phrasal verbs). If the instructions were to read as follows,

Read the following sentence and supply a suitable word for each blank :

The house was.....fire and the fire brigade was sent.....

it would become a task at the application level since out of his knowledge of grammar, the student picks out the right words of the right category to go into the blanks. To tell him to insert prepositions is to prompt the possible category of answers.

It is also to be noticed that there is not a great variety in the item-types used at present in testing grammar. Rewriting and blank filling exercises predominate. The use of multiple choice items in testing grammar and usage seems to be unknown except in a few universities. No. 15 is a test of knowledge of word order. To make phrases or sentences out of words jumbled together—such tasks are rarely set in question papers.

It might be useful to review the scheme of grammar testing proposed here by means of a table (see opposite page) incorporating

a selected topic in grammar and illustrative test items for it under each of the three levels of behaviour. Needless to say, all topics do not lend themselves to the same mode of testing. But it will be noticed that the illustrations include a variety of item-types. The progression from knowledge to communication level tasks also implies changes from objective to subjective judgement in marking since at the higher levels there is not a fixed answer to a question. The answer may take various forms which it is not always possible to anticipate. However, criteria for marking can be evolved in place of an exact scoring key.

This article has deliberately avoided some other questions: What is the place of grammar teaching and testing in developing and assessing proficiency in a language? What should be the antecedents of a communication skills syllabus such as that evolved by Bombay University for First Year B. A. (where grammar is only tested incidentally)? Is formal knowledge of grammar a worthwhile objective to test? These are questions requiring discussion beyond the scope of this article. The refrain in this article has been that the nature of tasks set in grammar tests must be made more complex and nearer life-like activities. A framework within which this can be done in a realistic and paced fashion is suggested.

References

1. Bloom, B.S. ed. (1956). *A Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: The Classification of Educational Goals Handbook: Cognitive Domain*, New York: Longmans, Green. Groups of evaluation experts and experts on various school subjects met severally in the early 1950's, to arrive at solutions to the problem of stating clearly where the curriculum should take the learner. (The problem is not peculiar to India or to E.L.T.) The results of their efforts are summarized in this book. A scheme is set out by which it becomes possible to envisage increasingly complex levels of behaviour in learning the subject matter of any field including literature and second languages. A means of stating objectives specifically in terms of performance, a means even of deriving objectives for the curriculum, is furnished.
2. Bloom, B.S., Hastings, J.T. and Madaus, G.P. (1971). *Handbook on Formative and Summative Evaluation of Student Learning*, New York: McGraw Hill. Details of further work along the

lines indicated above are provided. The use of evaluative procedures to guide learning and teaching and later to certify achievement are discussed. Evaluation techniques are illustrated for several subjects for objectives at every intellectual level. The chapter entitled 'Learning for Mastery' asserts the student's right to achievement, calling for the creation of conditions enabling the learning of a topic/skill up to a 'mastery' or criterion level.

3. Leech, G. and Svartvik, J. (1975). *A Communicative Grammar of English*, London: Longman. A grammar for teachers and advanced learners.
4. Quirk, R., Greenbaum, S., Leech, G. and Svartvik, J. (1972). *A Grammar of Contemporary*

English, London: Longman. A handbook of English grammar and usage.

5. Valette, R.M. and Disick, R.S. (1972). *Modern Language Performance Objectives and Individualization*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc. The authors have used a taxonomic model similar to that proposed by Bloom *et al.*, adapted to the special nature of language skills as content of study and have shown the possibility of deriving behaviourally stated objectives specific to performance in language. This model offers a means of arriving at objectives which are sensitive to or congruent with the actual intellectual attainment of the learner in a particular skill or topic at any stage in his education.

Table showing ILLUSTRATIVE ITEMS : Topic - MODAL AUXILIARIES

I. Knowledge

1. Which of these signify permission ?

- a) can c) will
b) should d) ought to

(This item tests understanding of signification.)

2. Put the following sentences in the past tense :

He can take the class.

(This tests knowledge of forms.)

3. Pick out the only correct sentence below :

- a) He may had done it.
b) He may to have done it.
c) He may has to do it.
d) He may have to do it.
e) He may have do it.
f) He may to have done it.
g) He do may have it.

(This tests knowledge of environmental constraints i.e., structure into which a modal can enter.)

4. Fill the blanks with the best of the alternatives given.

The teacher says my handwriting is very bad. She complains that she.....not read what I write.
(must, may, can)

(Understanding of signification)

II. Application

1. Fill each blank with an appropriate word :

Raju : Is Yasmeen coming to the film with us or not ?

Gopal : I don't know ; she..... come.

Seshe : No, I don't think she.... come. We have waited for her for half an hour now. Let's go.

(There is no indication in the instruction of what particular category is required.)

2. Complete ii) without changing the meaning at i) :

- a) i) The teacher said,

"There will have to be a test at the end of the lesson."

- ii) The teacher said that.....

- b) i) There are many ways of cooking brinjals.

- ii) Brinjals..... in many ways.

(The instruction unlike in I (2) does not indicate the nature of the particular change required.)

III. Communication

1. A college library has decided to put up a notice about borrowing books. They want borrowers

- a) to keep books clean.
b) to return books within 10 days.
c) not to scribble or write in books.
d) to stop turning down the corners of pages.
e) not to take more than two books at a time.

Write out the instructions for the notice. The instructions are not to address the borrowers directly.

2. Your friend has invited you to go to the zoo with him and his family on Sunday next. But you are not sure whether it will be possible for you to go. You have to help your parents with some work in the house. But you do not want to decline the invitation either. Write a reply to your friend, explaining the circumstances and expressing your desire to join the party, if possible.

Begin :

Dear Ramesh,

3. Your friend wants to know what ingredients go into the making of uppuma./parathas/dosa/chat/..... Write down in complete sentences what you will tell her. Remember there are some ingredients without which the dish cannot be made. There are others which add to the taste or vary it.

(Note : Communication tasks merge into integrated reading-writing activities, as control is relaxed. The difference between application and communication tasks is in the elaborate matrix of context, purpose, task of participants, etc. in which the communication role is set.)